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Sovietology and Perestroika: Methodology and Lessons from the Past

by Frederic J. Fleron, Jr. and Erik P. Hoffmann

It is somewhat ironic that in 1969, the same year that the Institute of the World Economy and International Relations (IMEMO) in Moscow convened a roundtable conference to discuss general methodological issues and the relevance of Western social science approaches such as game theory for the Soviet study of international relations, there appeared in the West the first collection of essays explaining, advocating, and demonstrating the application of Western social science concepts, theory, and methodology for an understanding of Soviet politics and international behavior. The title of that book was *Communist Studies and the Social Sciences: Essays on Methodology and Empirical Theory*, and it even included a chapter on game theory.

Fleron's introduction to that book argued that the study of the Soviet political system (indeed, all Communist systems) had proceeded in isolation from developments in social science concepts, theory, and methodology, and that this had occurred in large part because Sovietologists tended, for the most part, to view the object of their affection, disaffection, or defection as *sui generis*—a unique phe-

nomenon in the history of mankind and, therefore, irrelevant to the methodology and empirical theory of the social sciences. It was our feeling in the late 1960s that Communist studies and the social sciences could benefit from concerted and systematic efforts to link the two.

Imagine our surprise some 20 years later when we read the following passage in the prestigious quarterly journal of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences:

It is precisely because during the past twenty-odd years mainline Western Sovietology has concentrated on the sources of Soviet 'stability' as a 'mature industrial society' with a potential for 'pluralist development' that it has prepared us so poorly for the present crisis, not only in the Soviet Union but in communist systems everywhere. Instead of taking the Soviet leadership at its ideological word—that their task was to 'build socialism'—*Western Sovietology has by and large foisted on Soviet reality social science categories derived from Western realities*, with the result that the extraordinary, indeed surreal, Soviet experience has been rendered banal to the point of triviality.¹

1 Z, "To the Stalin Mausoleum," *Daedalus*, Vol. 119, No. 1 (Winter, 1990), pp. 295-344 (italics added). Z identified himself as Martin Malia, Professor of Russian History at the University of California at Berkeley, in "The Soviet Union Has Ceased to Exist," *The New York Times*, 31 August 1990, p. A15.



Of the four books cited by the author of the above article, the mysterious "Z," as the main culprits responsible for leading Soviet studies astray during the past two decades, the editors and contributors to two of those books are the authors of the present essay.²

On the one hand, we should be flattered to have been attributed the power to initiate such a dramatic shift in Sovietology. On the other hand, we would then have to share major blame for having poorly prepared the academic and policy communities for Gorbachev's domestic and international innovations and for the dramatic transformation of Eastern Europe in 1989. The fact is (quite happily, as it turns out) that we did *not* cause a dramatic shift in Sovietology, and thus (again, quite happily) we do *not* have to share the blame for misleading other analysts.

Whether Sovietology would have been better prepared for perestroika and post-communist systems if our colleagues had taken our advice twenty years ago is a moot point. But we do know two things: they did not take our advice and Sovietology was not prepared for perestroika. Instead, multidisciplinary area studies and policy-oriented research dominated Sovietology in the 1970s and 1980s. As if in response to a central directive, Western academics mastered or dabbled in new fields of Soviet studies. Some produced comparative research on different stages of Soviet and Russian history or creative contextual analyses at the interstices of various disciplines. Others parlayed their geographical area expertise into political influence and pecuniary reward through government and business consulting. A few senior academic specialists eagerly pursued temporary government assignments and business opportunities, and many junior specialists involuntarily abandoned academe because of the vagaries of the job market. Fewer and fewer Sovietologists sought to "construct" social science theory (macro-, middle-, or micro-level), and their professional ties to core disciplines diminished. Hence, it now appears to be time to move toward the integration of Sovietology and the social sciences by (1) investigating the impact of various

methodological approaches and (2) striving to produce more theoretically oriented studies.

One of the many curiosities in the "Z" article is that having briefly but bitingly criticized the alleged malevolent impact of social science theory and methodology on Soviet studies, he makes virtually no effort to explicate his own theoretical and methodological assumptions which are neither self-evident nor beyond question. In contrast, the present essay suggests new theoretical approaches and research methodologies that may further our understanding of perestroika, and encourages thoroughgoing and judicious re-evaluation of previous and current approaches and methodologies.

Also, after spending the first seven pages of the article denouncing Western Sovietology for giving us the wrong answers about the Soviet Union (including being unprepared for recent developments), Z devotes the remaining 40 pages to an analysis of the contemporary Soviet scene that sounds very much like the issues being debated in contemporary mainstream Sovietology (with few exceptions). Although some would disagree with Z's conclusion that the Soviet system "cannot be restructured or reformed, but can only either stagnate or be dismantled," in fact many Sovietologists have argued that point long enough to give it a familiar ring.

The decade of the 1960s began and ended with this apocalyptic dichotomy. Writing in 1960 about the post-Stalin reforms, Robert C. Tucker stated:

But it is doubtful that a policy of reform operating within these narrow limits can repair the rupture between the state and society that is reflected in the revival of the image of a dual Russia. A moral renovation of the national life, a fundamental reordering of relations, a process of genuine 'unbinding,' or, in other words, *an alteration in the nature of the system*, would be needed.³

Much later in the decade, Zbigniew Brzezinski gave voice to the now classic version of the apocalypse: transformation or degeneration? In answer to his own question, Brzezinski concluded that "it is the absence of basic institutional development in the Soviet political system that has posed the

2 The four books cited by Z are as follows: Frederic J. Fleron, Jr. (ed.), *Communist Studies and the Social Sciences: Essays on Methodology and Empirical Theory* (Chicago, 1969); Susan Gross Solomon (ed.), *Pluralism in the Soviet Union* (London and New York, 1983); Erik P. Hoffmann and Robbin F. Laird (eds.), *The Soviet Polity in the Modern Era* (Hawthorne, NY, 1984); and Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (New Haven, 1968).

3 Robert C. Tucker, "The Image of Dual Russia," in Cyril E. Black (ed.), *The Transformation of Russian Society: Aspects of Social Change Since 1861* (Cambridge, 1960), p. 605.

danger of the system's degeneration."⁴ Tucker and Brzezinski have not often agreed in their analyses of Soviet politics and foreign policy, but during the 1960s they agreed on at least this one key item: the most pressing problems of the Soviet system could not be solved without fundamental transformation of the nature of the system. Now even Gorbachev himself makes such claims and that is why he has termed *perestroika* a *revolution*. Initially, many in the West viewed this image as hyperbole. More recent events, such as the CC Plenums of February and March 1990 and the CPSU Congress of July 1990, demonstrate that is not the case. Therefore, Z's conclusion is by no means novel.

If neither Z's substantive discussion of the contemporary Soviet situation nor his conclusion are new, then what are we to make of his indictment of Western Sovietology? Yes, efforts have been made since the 1950s to use Western social science approaches to elucidate Soviet realities. And some of these efforts, perhaps especially in the late 1960s and early 1970s, imposed questionable Western approaches on recalcitrant Soviet realities, as Jerry Hough (one of those Z attacks for leading us astray) pointed out well over a decade ago in his too-little-read book *The Soviet Union and Social Science Theory*.⁵ In Hough's view and ours, however, it was the comparative political scientists and not the Sovietologists who were the worst offenders. Many of the theoretically grounded, as well as atheoretical, works by Sovietologists have withstood the test of time. Other attempts at theoretical and conceptual innovation were of an admittedly experimental nature and, despite their meager fruits or outright failure, were probably worth the effort. Because Sovietologists have proven quite capable of trash-

ing or ignoring irrelevant theoretical approaches and conceptual frameworks—their own and others'—it is hard to sustain Z's argument that the disciplines or field have been harmed, a few self-inflicted wounds notwithstanding.

The 1950s and 1960s

There never really was a "behavioral revolution in communist studies" in the late 1960s.⁶ But even those who tried to produce such a revolution respected the high-quality Sovietological research of the 1950s and early 1960s.⁷ Some of the young generation of Sovietologists, however, saw three issues emerging: (1) the potential of Western social science theories to add to our understanding of Soviet society and the need for Soviet data to help verify, reject, or refine these mostly middle-range theories; (2) the promise of philosophies of social science, especially logical positivism, to strengthen Sovietologists' proclivity to explain rather than describe and to improve their patterns of explanation and methods of concept formation; and (3) the decreasing value of totalitarian "models" in interpreting the Khrushchev and Brezhnev periods. Young Sovietologists were much more convinced than their elders about the increasing liabilities of totalitarian approaches. But junior scholars did not agree among themselves, let alone have a perverse effect on others, about the Soviet Union's destination, path, or pace as it moved away from totalitarianism and how best to study this movement.

The "young Turks" of the 1960s did not espouse a uniform new paradigm, ideal-type, model, or conceptual orientation. They called for theoretical and methodological experimentation, with emphasis

4 Zbigniew Brzezinski, "The Soviet Political System: Transformation or Degeneration," in Zbigniew Brzezinski (ed.), *Dilemmas of Change in Soviet Politics* (New York, 1969), p. 33.

5 Jerry F. Hough, *The Soviet Union and Social Science Theory* (Cambridge, 1977).

6 For early attempts to stimulate such a revolution, see the essays printed and reprinted in Roger E. Kanet (ed.), *The Behavioral Revolution and Communist Studies: Application of Behaviorally Oriented Political Research on the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe* (New York, 1971). Alexander Motyl applauds such efforts for their attempts "not merely to collect data but to generate theory." "In contrast," he argues, "the ossified behavioralism that has come to replace the original behaviorist vision has halted Sovietology's admirable effort to keep pace with theory; by largely abandoning the quest for theory, it has also deprived its practitioners of the capacity to explain what they purport to describe. At its worst, this deification of data, or what I call routine behavioralism, has reduced much of Sovietology to a form of political journalism." Motyl, *Sovietology, Rationality, Nationality: Coming to Grips with Nationalism in the USSR* (New York, 1990), p. 3. The introduction ("The Dilemmas of Sovietology") and Chapter 1 ("The Labyrinth of Theory") of this new book contain important discussions of central methodological issues in Soviet studies and their relation to contemporary philosophy of science. These two chapters elevate discussion of methodological questions in Soviet studies to a new and higher level of sophistication and are strongly recommended reading. Another recent analysis applauding the use of social science theory in Soviet studies is the lengthy review essay by Gabriel Almond and Laura Roselle ["Model Fitting in Communist Studies," in Thomas F. Remington (ed.), *Politics and the Soviet System* (London, 1989), pp. 170-224]. Along with Motyl, Almond and Roselle praise Soviet studies for their methodological and theoretical sophistication, in sharp contrast to 'Z.' Alfred G. Meyer has praised the Almond-Roselle essay for its "endorsement of methodological eclecticism" [*Soviet Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 3 (July, 1990), p. 603].

7 Works by Kennan, Fainsod, Moore, Schapiro, Inkeles, Hazard, Tucker, Meyer, Armstrong, Ulam, Brzezinski, and others were perceived to have made lasting contributions to our understanding of Soviet domestic politics and foreign policy. For a comparative analysis of these works, see Erik P. Hoffmann, "The Soviet Union: Consensus or Debate," *Studies in Comparative Communism*, Vol. VIII, No. 3 (Autumn, 1975), pp. 230-244.

on theories about bureaucracies, interest groups, modernization, communication, and political culture. Also, they called for qualitative content analysis of most topics and quantitative techniques for selected topics such as elite recruitment patterns, demographic trends, and economic growth and productivity rates. But virtually all agreed on the need for greater clarity and consistency in forming and applying (not necessarily "operationalizing") concepts such as 'role,' 'culture,' 'elite,' 'participation,' and 'influence.' With the benefit of hindsight, Hoffmann's criticism of the conceptual ambiguities in Hough's *The Soviet Prefects* seems well founded.⁸ More problematical was Hoffmann's overly general appeal for conceptual frameworks prior to data collection. This research strategy is most useful in relatively well-defined and data-rich fields, where incremental change is probable and puzzle-solving has been largely completed. But such a strategy can be burdened by positivist and conservative assumptions. It is particularly inappropriate for an analyst new to a rapidly changing subject matter and counter-productive if it distorts political actors' perceptions of their aims and environment or if it homogenizes the political behavior of groups and individuals, minimizing or disregarding contexts such as particular issue areas or time periods.⁹

Many of us writing twenty years ago were trying to grapple with the apparent contradiction between a post-Stalinist society that had become increasingly pluralistic as the result of industrialization and urbanization, and a political system that purported to be monolithic but in some important ways was not. One group of scholars continued to deal with this problem within the conceptual confines of the totalitarianism-pluralism dichotomy. Others implicitly or explicitly rejected this dichotomy and ventured in a different direction conceptually, theoretically, and empirically.¹⁰

The early research on cooptation is an example of the power and utility of social science theory to illuminate Soviet political reality. It began as a

rather traditional study of the Soviet political elite between the 19th and 23rd Party Congresses. The idea was to challenge the then prevailing view that the Central Committee represented the various 'interests' in the Soviet polity. Not an uncommon thesis, but at that time the concept 'interest' was operationally defined in purely institutional terms. As the representation of one or another "interest group" (usually the KGB or the military) increased in the CC, so the interests of that institutional body were said to be better represented in the CC and, therefore, that institution's power in the system was thereby enhanced. The problem with this approach was that it took a much too narrow and homogeneous view of interests. It viewed them strictly in formal, quantitative and mechanistic terms, and it attributed an unwarranted degree of consensus to the interests of members of the same bureaucratic and professional group, including the CPSU. One wondered what the pattern would look like if one took a broader and multifaceted view of interests, distinguished carefully between interests and capabilities, and defined 'interest' more in terms of functions than structure.

Proceeding in this fashion, Fleron found a high degree of continuity in the representation of institutions in the CC from 1952 to 1965, but also a dramatic shift in the kinds of individuals in the CC. By "kinds" of people he referred to an essential characteristic of their career pattern: the point at which they first engaged in full-time Party or government work. He distinguished between the "professional politicians" who entered the political elite in early career and worked their way up and the "coopted specialists" who pursued a non-political career in the early stages and entered the political elite only in mid-career. These latter types of individuals were said to be coopted into the Soviet political leadership system. The term 'cooptation' has both a general reportive definition and a more specific social science definition. Fleron used the latter as it appeared in Selznick's respected study of the TVA: "Cooptation is the process of absorbing new elements into the leadership or policy-deter-

8 Erik P. Hoffmann, "Social Science and Soviet Administrative Behavior," *World Politics*, Vol. XXIV, No. 3 (April, 1972), pp. 444-471.

9 As Hough suggested in his comment on Hoffmann's critique. See Hough, *The Soviet Union and Social Science Theory*, pp. 228-230.

10 In addition to the work of George Fischer and Michael Gehlen, Fleron's work on cooptation falls into this category. George Fischer, *The Soviet System and Modern Society* (New York, 1968); Michael P. Gehlen, *The Communist Party of the Soviet Union: A Functional Analysis* (Bloomington and London, 1969). Fleron's work on cooptation appeared as follows: "Toward a Reconceptualization of Political Change in the Soviet Union: The Political Leadership System," *Comparative Politics*, Vol. I, No. 2 (1969), pp. 228-244; "Cooptation as a Mechanism of Adaptation to Change: The Soviet Political Leadership System," *Polity*, Vol. II, No. 2 (1969), pp. 176-201; "Representation of Career Types in the Soviet Political Leadership," in R. Barry Farrell (ed.), *Political Leadership in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union* (Chicago, 1970; London, 1971); and "System Attributes and Career Attributes: The Soviet Leadership System, 1952-1965," in Carl Beck, et al., *Comparative Communist Political Leadership* (New York, 1973), pp. 43-85.

mining structure of an organization as a means of averting threats to its stability or existence."¹¹

Fleron discovered that less than 1/4 of the individuals elected to the CC in 1952 were coopted specialists, but that by 1961 more than half of the CC members fell into this category. One subsequently learns from the work of George Breslauer and others that this shift was in large part due to Khrushchev's attempt to create quickly within the Party a cadre of expert-interveners—party officials who could directly manage the economy because they had the technical-administrative skills to do so. "The secret of Khrushchev's authority-building strategy," wrote Breslauer, "lay in his simultaneous commitment to reassuring, inspiring, and transforming Soviet officialdom."¹²

In the context of discussions taking place among Sovietologists in the late 1960s, however, the process of cooptation had a somewhat different significance: it provided a process by which the specialized elites of an industrializing society could gain access to the political system through their virtual representatives in the Central Committee. This had the effect (even if this cannot be proven to have been the intent of the top Soviet leadership) of providing the Party with a mechanism of adaptation to change, which enhanced the legitimacy of the Party in the eyes of bureaucratic or professional elites and increased the sharing of responsibility (but not real power) with these elites. All of this constituted a mechanism of adaptation to change that was quite different from the received wisdom in the West. Sovietologists placed the USSR on the totalitarianism-pluralism continuum, with post-Stalinism closer to the pluralism end than Stalinism, but still not close enough to pluralism to be called "Western" pluralism; hence, all the qualifying adjectives in front of the term pluralism when it was used with reference to the USSR.

The concept 'cooptation' not only provided a conceptual alternative to the prevailing mode of interpretation, but it did so in a way that conformed with the reality of Soviet politics. The problem with the concept 'pluralist' (from the perspective of its advocates) was the failure of the Soviet system to practice it, and this meant that in the long run the Soviet system could not survive. The cooptation approach

showed these pluralist theorists to be wrong. Cooptation provided an alternative (albeit short-lived) mechanism of adaptation to change—a mechanism by which the interests generated by *social* pluralism could be given access to the political system without resorting to *political* pluralism.

Brezhnev chose to discontinue cooptation without providing an alternative mechanism of adaptation to change (say, genuine political pluralism). The resulting *zastoi* (stagnation) was the fault neither of those Sovietologists who employed the cooptation approach nor of those who saw political pluralism as the only way by which the interests of a differentiated society could be accommodated. Yet Z would seem to blame us all! He really should blame Brezhnev, whose authority-building strategy emphasized "trust in cadres."

The 1980s and 1990s

For more than half a century we have attempted to apprehend the USSR in a very different fashion than we have studied other societies, claiming that Soviet society was completely different from any other society on earth and that, because of its closed nature and the paucity of reliable data, *sui generis* methods had to be developed to study it. Unique methods are required to study a unique system and, of course, they give unique results. Hence, social science and Sovietology had little to offer each other.

In light of this, it seems that Sovietology was unprepared for perestroika, not because we had been influenced too much by Western social science, but because we had been influenced by it too little. Now, it is fair to ask, where are we and where should we focus our energies?

Let us try to clarify the nature of the problem. While acknowledging that Soviet studies has been strengthened by multidisciplinary and long-term policy-oriented research since the early 1970s, we believe there are numerous reasons why Western Sovietologists (collectively, if not individually) are not well-equipped to comprehend perestroika. Here is our lengthy and open-ended list of reasons that fall into two general categories: professional and socio-cultural.

11 Philip Selznick, *TVA and the Grass Roots: A Study in the Sociology of Formal Organization* (New York, 1966), p. 13.
12 George W. Breslauer, *Khrushchev and Brezhnev as Leaders: Building Authority in Soviet Politics* (London, 1982), p. 48.

Professional Factors

1. Lack of background in social science theory, philosophy of science, and comparative politics. We who have bought into the "uniqueness" of the USSR have tended to isolate Sovietologists from mainstream social science inquiry in the post-World War II period. The divorce of Sovietology from general philosophical, epistemological, and methodological concerns has greatly weakened our ability to ask theoretically relevant questions about perestroika. Perestroika transcends the boundaries of geographic area specialization. By its very essence, perestroika stands against uniqueness. Perestroika is a cultural revolution, but it is a nomothetic (not an idiographic) cultural revolution.¹³ It is part of a global cultural revolution; hence, the study of perestroika can benefit from generally accepted goals, presuppositions, and methods.

2. Too much policy-oriented research geared to the short term (less than one year). All governments must deal with day-to-day problems, but these problems are often compounded by research that is not historically grounded or far-sighted. Longitudinal studies can be of considerable practical value because they compare phenomena at different stages of their past and probable future development. In contrast, short-term policy analysis places heavy emphasis on current political personalities, top-level power relationships, and both international and individual crises, rather than on policymaking, policy implementation, and policy outcomes at the national, regional, and local levels, counterelites and the grass-roots, and underlying socio-economic and scientific-technological trends. Also, short-term policy commentary is usually more focused on means than ends, more speculative than analytical, more partial to simplistic than complex explanations, more eager for quick-fixes than durable solutions, more accepting of official than independent-minded views, and more cognizant of immediate political costs and consequences than eventual multi-faceted costs and consequences.

3. Mediocre linguistic skills (e.g., excessive emphasis on reading the stilted language of official Party and government pronouncements has not

prepared us well for the living language of perestroika).

Socio-Cultural Factors

4. The personal background of most Sovietologists (mainly middle and upper-middle class) has introduced certain biases into our orientations and approaches:

A. We tend to adopt elitist approaches. We have focused on the view from the top rather than the bottom of the political pyramid. Hence, we have a bias toward guided reform rather than revolution.

B. We tend to judge regimes by how they treat intellectuals.¹⁴ We focused on dissidents (democratic much more than authoritarian dissidents) in the 1960s and 1970s. Now we focus on Moscow intellectuals as the objects of our research and the sources of our information on many topics. We have too often succumbed to the temptation to take their "insider" pronouncements at face value and to presume they have much greater political or intellectual influence than they do.

C. We tend to overvalue "national interests" and overestimate central control of regional and local politics and everyday life.

5. We are products of an Anglo-American political culture, either by birth or, in the case of the emigres among us, by assimilation. As a result, we tend to define democracy in procedural rather than substantive terms. Many of us have little appreciation for the intellectual and historical traditions from which the Bolsheviks emerged—a revolutionary tradition that emphasized economic freedoms over political freedoms. It was no accident that the Founding Fathers framed the U.S. Constitution as a political document, not an economic document. They already had their economic freedom. Likewise, it was no accident that Tkachev and the *Narodnaya Volya* held English liberalism in such contempt. What good was freedom of speech to people who were hungry?

6. Western intellectuals can relate more to the incrementalism and flexibility of Gorbachev and perestroika than to the uncompromising opposition to them—reactionary and conservative opposition especially (e.g., Yegor Ligachev), but

¹³ For a discussion of this distinction between idiographic and nomothetic studies, see Fleron's article "Soviet Area Studies and the Social Sciences: Some Methodological Problems in Communist Studies," *Soviet Studies*, Vol. XIX, No. 3 (1968), pp. 317-320. This article was reprinted as chapter 1 in *Communist Studies and the Social Sciences*.

¹⁴ A point made earlier by Jerry Hough in *The Soviet Union and Social Science Theory*, pp. 180, 189.

ultra-radical opposition as well (e.g., Boris Yeltsin).¹⁵

7. Inability to comprehend localism and departmentalism as well as competing interests and opinions in a party-state not grounded on the western principles of the "rule of law" and "constitutionality."

8. We are blinded by Weberian norms according to which modernization is the shift from the particularism of traditional society to the universalism of legal-rational society. We have only recently begun to comprehend the nature and persuasiveness of a distinctly neo-traditional society as one that stands outside this Weberian dichotomy.

9. Inability to understand intense ethnicity and intense loyalty to native cities, towns, and villages (because of the American "melting pot" and our frequently changing residences).

10. Inability to understand scarcity and bargaining. A real weakness of Soviet studies is our lack of understanding of the linkages between economics and politics at the personal, group, and organizational levels as well as the national and republic levels.

11. Considerable professional mobility in the U.S. reduces our ability to understand a society in which you cannot say "take this job and shove it." In other words, we need better comprehension of, even "feel" for, Soviet patron-client relationships, bureaucratic resistance to meritocracy, and the "leveling mentality" that pervades society and obstructs perestroika.

12. Military experience is lacking among Western Sovietologists. This has led to an anti-military bias, strengthened (in the case of many American academics) by opposition to the Vietnam War. Hence, there is a general lack of interest in and understanding of military issues—including CPSU-military relations, the role of the armed forces in society, and the "military ethos" in Soviet culture stemming from the WWII trauma and the CPSU's use of the WWII victory and the Cold War to legitimize its power and East European empire.

We suggest that proper attention to the issues raised by the first two professional factors will contribute to a long-run solution of the problems cre-

ated by the socio-cultural factors. This is reason enough to be more explicit and rigorous in our use of theory. But there are other important and compelling reasons as well. What now seems increasingly clear is that as the Soviet people change their polity, society, and economy and are influenced more by the ideas and accomplishments of Western countries, so the methods of Sovietologists must become more like the methods employed by social scientists to study human behavior in those Western societies. The pressure on us to do so will increase as more and more Soviet scholars and analysts make use of "Western" (no longer "bourgeois") social science theory and methods.

By now a quite familiar story, one of the many interesting features of perestroika is that some of the theoretical parameters of Soviet discussions were provided by academicians. Indeed, one of perestroika's leading documents, the Novosibirsk Report, was authored by a sociologist attached to the Siberian Branch of the USSR Academy of Sciences, Tatyana Zaslavskaya. This fact is remarkable for several reasons, not least of which is that much of the rationale (if not impetus) for perestroika is said to be based on the results of concrete sociological research. This gives evidence of the reversal of a potentially dangerous situation that has been noted not only by Western Sovietologists, but by Gorbachev himself: every reform effort since the death of Stalin has ended in failure because Soviet leaders do not appear to be able to learn from past mistakes. As Gail Lapidus has put it:

The primitive level of economics, not to mention sociology, demography, ethnography, psychology, and the study of public opinion, and the paucity of economic and social statistics have deprived not only policymakers but society as a whole of the self-knowledge that is a prerequisite to genuine progress.¹⁶

But just how do the Soviet leaders go about acquiring knowledge of their own system? What categories of analysis (concepts and theories) do they employ?

(1) At a very general level, we are all quite familiar with statements from the General Secretary that the Soviet Union is a great power, it just "don't act like

15 In his lament that "sovietological perestroika is, alas, far behind the one in Moscow," Alexander Yanov criticizes both conservative and liberal perspectives on Soviet Russia. Yanov, "Is Sovietology Reformable?" in Robert O. Crummey (ed.), *Reform in Russia and the U.S.S.R.: Past and Prospects* (Urbana and Chicago, 1989), pp. 257-276.

16 Gail W. Lapidus, "State and Society: Toward the Emergence of Civil Society in the Soviet Union," in Seweryn Bialer (ed.), *Politics, Society, and Nationality Inside Gorbachev's Russia* (Boulder and London, 1989), p. 131.

one"; that it is a national scandal that a small country like South Korea ranks higher than the USSR on the list of the world's exporting countries, or that the USSR "should abandon everything that led to the isolation of socialist countries from the mainstream of world civilization."¹⁷ Such statements suggest that Gorbachev and the *perestroishchiki* are no doubt familiar with some of the ideas contained in or are intuitively aware of the issues raised by such works as *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers* (1987) by Paul Kennedy, *The Rise of the Trading State* (1986) by Richard Rosecrance, and *The World Revolution of Westernization* (1987) by Theodore von Laue.

(2) There has been a tradition in some Soviet quarters of employing "Western" social science categories, at least with regard to their analysis of the nature of the international system and the Soviet place in it.¹⁸ Even in the early 1970s, some of us were impressed by the knowledge (if not always understanding) of Western social science literature by leading officials at IMEMO, the SShA Institute, and elsewhere in Moscow.

(3) The *perestroishchiki* also appear to have read the works of some of our Sovietologists—even adopting some of their arguments, especially with regard to identifying some of the main problems of the USSR in the period of *zastoi*. Soviet interest in Western economic analysis of the USSR is enormous. Witness the voracious Soviet appetite for the reports of the Joint Economic Committee of the U. S. Congress, compiled by John Hardt, and the Soviet translations of works by and frequent consulting with senior Western economists. And Soviet interest in Western political and legal ideas is also growing. Witness the *perestroishchiki's* increasing attention to Western concepts such as 'checks and balances,' 'separation of powers,' 'the market,' and 'the rule of law.'

But if the Soviets are trying to understand better their own system by making increasing use of social science theory, concepts, and methodology—despite their lack of background in these spheres—can the same be said of the profession of Sovietology?

To what extent have the concepts of Western social science in general and comparative politics in particular been employed by Western scholars in an attempt to understand perestroika? We have all encountered the concepts 'political culture,' 'civil society,' 'pluralism,' and 'exit' and 'voice' in the now enormous literature on perestroika. But how many of these concepts have been used as more than metaphors or informing tropes? For example, Gail Lapidus uses Hirschman's terms 'exit' and 'voice' chiefly for heuristic purposes. Gordon Bengsten and Russell Bova use the concepts in a manner consistent with Hirschman and attempt to retest Hirschman's basic propositions in their analysis of worker power under communism.¹⁹

Let us approach this issue from a different angle. Perestroika has been much misunderstood both in the Soviet Union and elsewhere. Almost everyone is *for* perestroika, at least in public. The reason there appears to have been little public opposition to perestroika is that it means different things to different people. This has been pointed out by many Western scholars, some of whom have suggested that various problems of perestroika result from the fact that the Soviet leaders do not have a *theory of perestroika*—that is, a theory of the politics of economic reform, as Ed Hewett has put it,²⁰ or a theory of simultaneous transitions from a totalitarian/authoritarian to a liberal/socialist or social democratic government and from a planned to a mixed or market economy. But Soviet officials and analysts do appear to be revising the categories of thought they use to diagnose their problems. This reconceptualization is part of the Soviet leadership's attempt to improve self-understanding—an issue to which George Breslauer sensitized us in his comparison of the authority-building strategies of Khrushchev and Brezhnev nearly a decade ago.²¹

But what theory or theories should the Soviets use in acquiring such self-understanding? And what theory or theories should Westerners use in attempting to understand them? Should we use the same theories?

17 Gorbachev's remarks to the CC Plenum of February 1990. *The New York Times*, 6 February 1990, p. A16.

18 See Allen Lynch, *The Soviet Study of International Relations* (Cambridge, 1987).

19 See Lapidus, "State and Society," pp. 123ff, and Bengsten and Bova, "Worker Power Under Communism: The Interplay of Exit and Voice," *Comparative Economic Studies*, Vol. XXXII, No. 1 (1990), pp. 42-72. For useful discussions of metaphors and informing tropes, see James J. Bono, "Literature, Literary Theory, and the History of Science," *Publication of the Society for Literature and Science*, Vol. 2, No. 1 (1986), pp. 5-9; and George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Metaphors We Live By* (Chicago and London, 1980).

20 Ed A. Hewett, *Reforming the Soviet Economy: Equality versus Efficiency* (Washington, 1988), pp. 10, 275ff. Hewett's statement may have been the inspiration for Jerry Hough's recent effort at developing such a theory. See Jerry F. Hough, "The Politics of Successful Economic Reform," *Soviet Economy*, Vol. 5, No. 1 (1989), pp. 3-46.

21 Breslauer, *Khrushchev and Brezhnev as Leaders*.

Ben Eklof has suggested that the Soviets generally lack organizing theories *a la* Weber and Durkheim:

The virtual absence in Soviet education of any discussion of 'middle-level' theories in social analysis, of sociological thought in the Weberian or Durkheimian traditions, leaves many emigres without coherent intellectual strategies or vocabulary (except a curiously inverted Marxism-Leninism) to deal with the complex issues they must often address as 'experts' on their own country.²²

Eklof is not alone. His statement relates to Ed Hewett's observation that the Soviets need a political theory of economic reform and to Gail Lapidus' claim about the "poverty of socio-political thought" in the USSR. But Eklof makes an interesting assertion about the importance of middle-level theories with apparent disregard to the content of those theories. How else to juxtapose Durkheim and Weber in such a way? One is clearly the positivist; the other attempts to fuse the idealist and positivist perspectives. The result is two very different schools of social thought. Therefore, it makes a big difference whether one chooses Durkheim or Weber.

Some have suggested that we distinguish between positivists and holists—that these represent two methodological cultures that "coexist uneasily in the social sciences."²³ Perhaps so, but life is never that simple. There are, after all, many ways to dichotomize the world (if that is what one wishes to do), and that is only one way. Durkheim, for example, is simultaneously a positivist and a holist: a positivist because he believed in the "objective reality of social facts" and a holist in that he reversed "the perspective which makes society the result of individual behavior and insist(s) that behavior is made possible by collective social systems individuals have assimilated, consciously or unconsciously."²⁴

Along with Sigmund Freud, the psychologist, and Ferdinand de Saussure, the founder of modern linguistics, Emile Durkheim "helped to set the study of human behavior on a new footing." They "saw that the study of human behavior misses its best opportunities if it tries to trace the historical causes of individual events. Instead it must focus on the

functions events have within a general social framework. It must treat social facts as part of a system of conventions and values."²⁵

Saussure's major contribution to the study of linguistics was to draw a "distinction between the *synchronic* study of language (study of the linguistic system in a particular state, without reference to time) and the *diachronic* study of language (study of its evolution in time)."²⁶ Not only is this another way to dichotomize approaches to social inquiry that may reveal important differences in outlook, it is one that is used in Sovietology, although we do not identify with the terms synchronic and diachronic. One of the controversies in the past decade is whether the Soviet system in its present form can be properly understood without rigorous analysis of the historical development of that system. Stephen F. Cohen explicitly argues this position in *Rethinking the Soviet Experience*.²⁷ Such a call for more historical studies reflects a diachronic bias (one that also can be found in the work of Tucker and Lewin). Is the result of this approach a necessary rejection of the more synchronic approaches of Kremlinology, the conflict model, the group theorists, etc.? And what are the implications of adopting a more synchronic approach *a la* Durkheim or Saussure?

Satisfactory answers to these questions require us to develop not only a higher degree of methodological self-awareness, but also a higher degree of cross-disciplinary awareness of theory, facts, and methodology than Sovietology has had in the past. For many of these same questions have preoccupied those who have attempted to apprehend other cultures, other societies, and other political systems, whether they be scholars or laypersons. This is reason enough for Sovietology to part company with the view that the USSR is unique and, therefore, beyond the pale of normal social science research methods and theory. It should be clear by now that we must attempt to apprehend the Soviet Union the same way in which we apprehend other societies. To do otherwise would be an attempt to perpetuate our subject as an arcanum. That would be difficult in the age of glasnost', when the USSR is no longer "a mystery wrapped in a riddle inside

22 Ben Eklof, *Soviet Briefing: Gorbachev and the Reform Period* (Boulder and London, 1989), p. 6.

23 Jack Snyder, "Science and Sovietology: Bridging the Methods Gap in Soviet Foreign Policy Studies," *World Politics*, Vol. XL, No. 2 (1988), p. 169.

24 Jonathan Culler, *Ferdinand de Saussure*, Rev. ed. (Ithaca, 1986), p. 87.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 16.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 45.

27 Stephen F. Cohen, *Rethinking the Soviet Experience: Politics and History Since 1917* (New York and Oxford, 1985).

an enigma," as Winston Churchill once described Russia, and it would no doubt result in its practitioners being held up to ridicule or dismissed as irrelevant.

There are a number of encouraging signs that Sovietology is moving away from the arcane and into the mainstream. At perhaps the most basic and obvious level is the fact that since the mid-1980s an increasing number of studies of Soviet politics and foreign policy have contained references to theoretical and comparative literature. This is a far cry from the situation two decades ago. Of course, there are exceptions, but the point is they are now the exceptions, not the rule. This is important, for it demonstrates that scholars treating the Soviet Union now see the relevance of comparative studies and theory to their work. (Journalistic accounts have a different function altogether, of course, and these remarks do not apply there).

At yet another level, there are now emerging more explicit efforts at testing propositions from the social science literature derived from the study of other social systems. Three areas of Soviet domestic politics that have shown much promise in the last year or two are (1) the application of Mancur Olson's theory of the "logic of collective action" to the Soviet nationalities question;²⁸ (2) the application to the current Soviet situation of theories of the transition from autocratic to democratic regimes derived largely from the Iberian and Latin American experiences;²⁹ and (3) some of the efforts that have been made to evaluate Gorbachev as leader.³⁰ Whether this promise is realized and whether this constitutes a trend, only time will tell.

Before closing, we cannot resist mentioning what we consider to be some fruitful (and even exciting) lines of future inquiry; indeed, in the spirit of this essay, it is almost incumbent on us to do so. Some of them are quite far removed from mainstream positivist social science or social scientism, but could nevertheless contribute to giving a much

more theoretically oriented and systematic thrust to Sovietology in the future.

1) Re-evaluate or replicate some of the classic studies of Soviet politics, especially in light of information recently made available under glasnost'.³¹ How do these studies hold up in light of new evidence?

2) In the process of doing the above, we should re-evaluate the various schools or approaches that shaped Sovietology in preceding decades: Kremlinology, the social systems approach, the conflict school, the interest group approach, the directed society and bureaucratic ossification theories, the institutional pluralism approach, the political culture approach, etc.

3) Analyze perestroika in the USSR and the rejection of reform Communism in Eastern Europe in light of current organization, communication, and role theories, and consider how data from the experience of the former Soviet bloc might alter those bodies of theory. For example, the role conflicts, role stress, and role ambiguities among bureaucrats in these countries are intense and are greatly influencing personal as well as professional relationships. How important are the differences between the Soviet Union and Eastern European countries, because one-party socialism was developed in the former and imposed on the latter?

4) Read Stephen Burant's article on the influence of Russian tradition on the political style of the Soviet elite and then compare it to Robin Horton's brilliant study of tradition and modernity.³² Horton's point of departure was "Durkheim's neglected insight concerning the continuities between, on the one hand, the spiritualistic thought of traditional cultures in Africa and elsewhere, and on the other the mechanistic thought of modern Western cultures."³³ In his analysis, Horton contrasts two syndromes: cognitive traditionalism and cognitive modernism. This conceptual apparatus has considerable applicability to Soviet politics in

28 Articles by Jerry F. Hough and Mancur Olson plus discussion by others in *Journal of Soviet Nationalities*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Summer, 1990), pp. 1-65; Alexander J. Motyl, *Sovietology, Rationality, Nationality: Coming to Grips with Nationalism in the USSR*, especially Ch. 2.

29 Thomas F. Remington, "Regime Transition in Communist System: The Soviet Case," *Soviet Economy*, Vol. 6, No. 2 (April-June, 1990), pp. 160-190; Russell Bova, "Political Dynamics of the Post-Communist Transition: A Comparative Perspective" (Dickinson College, Unpublished ms., February 1991).

30 George W. Breslauer, "Evaluating Gorbachev as Leader," *Soviet Economy*, Vol. 5, No. 4 (October-December, 1989), pp. 299-340.

31 The fine case studies and monographs of the 1960s by Linden, Ploss, and Hough, as well as the classics of Kremlinology by Conquest, Tatu, and Rush, virtually scream for re-evaluation and/or replication. Also, how does one evaluate Barrington Moore's two major books on modernization and change in the Soviet Union thirty-five years later?

32 Stephen R. Burant, "The Influence of Russian Tradition on the Political Style of the Soviet Elite," *Political Science Quarterly*, Vol. 102, No. 2 (1987), pp. 273-293; Robin Horton, "African Traditional Thought and Western Science," *Africa*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (1967), pp. 302-71 and Vol. 37, No. 2 (1967), pp. 155-187.

33 Robin Horton, "Tradition and Modernity Revisited," in Martin Hollis and Steven Lukes (eds.), *Rationality and Relativism* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 201.

the Gorbachev period: Ligachev, the Russian neo-Stalinists, many middle-level and local bureaucrats, and other *temnye lyudi* represent cognitive traditionalism; Gorbachev and other moderate to radical *perestroishchiki* represent cognitive modernism to some extent; and Boris Yeltsin, Gavriil Popov, Anatoly Sobchak, the non-communist leaders of most republic soviets and popular fronts, and other ultraradical to liberal or social democratic peaceful revolutionaries, to a much greater extent.

5) Take cues from Ken Jowitt and Andrew Walder, but beware that they may be using the concept of neo-traditionalism quite differently, even allowing for dissimilarities between the USSR (Jowitt) and the PRC (Walder).³⁴ Replicate Jerry Hough's study *The Soviet Prefects* with at least one eye open to the types of relationships and processes denoted by the concept 'neotraditionalism,' especially in Walder's usage. This is an exciting concept with implications that extend far beyond academia. As Thane Gustafson has pointed out, "If Jowitt is right and neotraditionalism is a corrupt form of Leninism, then what Gorbachev is doing is quite reasonable and may even work. If Walder is right—that neotraditionalism is the essence of Leninism and the key to its success—then Gorbachev is bursting wide open the entire working basis of the communist authority system. Not only is he going to fail; he is going to blow the whole country wide open."³⁵

6) Read Clifford Geertz's classic "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight."³⁶ Your view of perestroika may never be the same. Deep play is an allegory on perestroika. Much can be gleaned from viewing perestroika as a "text" that serves a purpose much like other art forms, "coloring experience with the light they cast it in."³⁷ In the Balinese cockfight, deep play exists when the "stakes are so high that it is, from [the] utilitarian standpoint,

irrational for men to engage in it at all." By defining perestroika as revolutionary in its scope and not "just another reform," Gorbachev could be seen as having established his program in a deep play context. The Party bureaucracy has appeared reluctant to gamble with its future in an all-or-nothing context. But Gorbachev seems to have forced deep play rules on it by insisting at the January 1989 Central Committee Plenum that "the CPSU is the ruling party and therefore bears the whole brunt of responsibility before Soviet society for the destiny of socialism and of the country" (italics added). In February 1990, however, the Central Committee Plenum decided to end the party's legal monopoly of political power. Deep play is precisely this process of upping the stakes for winning and losing in a highly public fashion, and ultra-conservative Communist reformers and both peaceful and militant non-Communist revolutionaries are deepening the play further and further.³⁸ Gorbachev may be employing the rules of deep play not only for himself and the party, but for the country as well, when he repeatedly affirms that Soviet interaction with the rest of the world must be economic as well as military and political and that the Soviet economy cannot yet successfully participate in an inter-dependent global economy.

7) Learn the principles of hermeneutic interpretation and apply them to glasnost'.³⁹ The keys here are the concept of pre-understanding and the distinction between the meaning and significance of a text. Employ these concepts and distinctions if you agree that one needs to know much about Russian culture and language before one can really understand Soviet politics and society. Also, let's make our assumptions as explicit as possible, so we can subject them to critical scrutiny and improve self-knowledge and collective understanding of what we are doing and what we could and should be doing.

34 Ken Jowitt, "Soviet Neotraditionalism: The Political Corruption of a Leninist Regime," *Soviet Studies*, Vol. XXXV, No. 3 (1983), pp. 275-297;

Andrew G. Walder, *Communist Neo-traditionalism: Work and Authority in Chinese Industry* (Berkeley and London, 1986).

35 "The Aftermath of the 19th Conference of the CPSU: A Soviet Economy Roundtable," *Soviet Economy*, Vol. 4, No. 3 (1988), p. 218.

36 Clifford Geertz, "Deep Play: Notes on the Balinese Cockfight," in Paul Rabinow and William M. Sullivan (eds.), *Interpretive Social Science: A Reader* (Berkeley and London, 1979), pp. 181-223. This paper was originally published in *Daedalus*, Vol. 101, No. 1, 1972.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 221.

38 Although not explicitly employing the "Deep Play" metaphor, Peter Reddaway's discussions of Gorbachev's attempts to increase the stakes in his struggles with his rivals suggest the utility of further exploration of this approach. See, for example, Reddaway's articles in *The New York Review of Books*, 28 May 1987; 18 August 1988; and 17 August 1989.

39 There is, of course, a vast literature in the hermeneutic tradition and about hermeneutic interpretation. Two good places to begin are: Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston, 1969), and Frank Kermode, *The Genesis of Secrecy: On the Interpretation of Narrative* (Cambridge and London, 1979), Publication Copy.

Conclusion

Everything considered, there was little “madness” in the aims and output of the fledgling Sovietologists of the late 1960s. Most had historically grounded and multidisciplinary interests as well as methodological and epistemological concerns. Occasionally their exhortations were shrill and their confidence in particular approaches and techniques excessive. But they committed themselves to “methodological pluralism”—that is, they scrutinized alternative concepts, theories, and techniques and tried to tailor them to appropriate topics. Not surprisingly, certain innovations succeeded (fully or partially) and others failed to enhance understanding of Soviet society. Many senior scholars encouraged this experimentation and participated in it. Some, however, were unduly rankled by the newcomers’ calls to explicate widely used but generally unexamined methodological assumptions and adapt them to changing new circumstances. Others were rightly concerned that a preoccupation with political science might diminish one’s feel for politics and one’s ability to communicate persuasively with policymakers.

Today, the former “young Turks” of the 1960s bring to their analysis of the Gorbachev period most of the strengths and weaknesses of other Western analysts. Our incremental and bargaining approaches may be of decreasing relevance to understanding the increasingly polarized and fragmented Soviet polity of the early 1990s. Our focus on elites and bureaucracies has ill-prepared us for comprehending powerful social forces and popular movements, and the rapidly changing perspectives “from the top” and “from the bottom” are producing a new polity or polities. But contemporary Sovietologists should more than ever heed the two-decade-old appeal to benefit from and contribute to the social sciences. Our investigations should focus on theories of social change (e.g., the interconnections among technology, culture, and development), the transition from command to market economies (e.g., the integration of national and regional economies into the global market

economies), the democratization and disintegration of one-party political systems (e.g., with Latin American and Iberian comparisons), and other vital subjects not anticipated by Westerners of virtually all ideological and methodological persuasions.

Z is certainly right about one thing. There are a lot of hidden assumptions underlying our past and present research on the Soviet Union and Russia. Are we sufficiently aware of them? A sage once said that Sovietologists give very little thought to methodology; they just use it. But what is the “it” they use? Surely we should reflect more on this question, because we are consciously and subconsciously adapting the research methodologies and theories of the past to the conditions of the present. In the process, there is little doubt that these theories and methodologies will undergo their own forms of perestroika. That should be viewed as part of a quite natural and welcome process in the advancement of knowledge, no more pathological in the social sciences than in the physical and biological sciences. The complexity and flux of contemporary conditions pose major challenges to policymakers and analysts as well as social science theorists, other academics, and the informed public. The political-administrative, socioeconomic, scientific-technological, environmental-ecological, ideological-cultural, and military-security dimensions of modernization are tumultuously influencing one another, not only in the Soviet Union but worldwide. And they are rapidly changing the very nature of the Soviet Union and its relationships with the rest of the world.

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